



Senator Feinstein Urges Renewal of Assault Weapons Ban, Passage of Anti-Gang Legislation to Protect Cops and Communities
April 29, 2004

Washington, DC – Concerned about the recent spate of gang-related cop killings in California, Senator Dianne Feinstein (*D-Calif.*) urged Congress today to renew the assault weapons ban and pass legislation she introduced with Senator Orrin Hatch (*R-Utah*) to crack down on gang violence.

Following is Senator Feinstein's floor statement:

"Mr. President, three law enforcement officers in the State of California have been murdered in the past three weeks in gang-related slayings. And a fourth was killed in February.

I come to the floor to pay tribute to these brave officers and discuss the perils police face every day, especially from gang members armed with high-powered assault weapons and other guns.

Late Saturday night, April 10, one of San Francisco's finest young police officers, Officer Isaac Espinoza, was shot and killed.

Officer Espinoza was gunned down with an assault weapon, an AK-47, taking three shots in the back as the gunman fired 15 rounds in just seconds. Officer Espinoza and his partner, who was also shot, had no time to seek refuge. The suspect in the shootings is a known gang member.

Officer Espinoza, at 29 years of age, was a distinguished police officer, one of the Department's bright young stars who worked in one of the City's toughest areas.

In fact, Officer Espinoza received three major service awards in his eight years with the Department including:

- **the Silver Medal of Valor for his bravery in a shoot-out that occurred on October, 20, 2000;**
- **the Purple Heart for injuries sustained in a foot pursuit as he and his partner attempted to make a drug arrest on May 5, 2002; and**
- **the Police Commission Commendation for his work to reduce crime in the Bayview neighborhood.**

He was also recognized as Patrol Officer of the Month by the Captain of the Bayview Police Station in June 2003.

Officer Espinoza also served as a new board member of the Police Officers Association. He was Assistant Commissioner of the softball league. And he planned to take the next Sergeant's exam.

His death is a great loss to the Department and to the City. It is a particularly great loss to his wife and 3-year-old daughter.

On April 15, Merced Police Officer Stephan Gray was shot and killed when a suspect he was chasing on foot turned around and fired two bullets into his chest.

Officer Gray, 34 years of age, worked in the Merced Police Department's gang violence unit, working with some of his community's most dangerous offenders. In fact, the suspect in his killing is a gang member with whom he is believed to have had previous encounters.

Officer Gray had served with the Merced Police Department for seven years. And in those seven years of service, he earned the admiration of his colleagues and once received a commendation for resuscitating an 11-month old baby.

Being a police officer was not just a job for Officer Gray, it was a way for him to change the world. He not only patrolled the streets, but he went out and got to know the neighborhood children in the communities he served. He shot baskets with the kids and, drawing on his days as a high school track star, taught them how to sprint.

He was admired by his friends and neighbors for his loyalty to the police department, but also his devotion to his family.

Officer Gray was a true pillar of his community. He is survived by his wife and three children, ages 13, 5, and 3.

California Highway Patrol Officer Thomas Steiner, 35 years old, was murdered April 21 in a drive-by shooting in broad daylight. Officer Steiner had just walked out of the Pomona courthouse after testifying on a series of traffic cases when a 16-year-old shot him three times with a handgun, hitting him once in the head.

According to Pomona Police Chief James Lewis, the teenager charged with the shooting did not know Officer Steiner, but was merely intent on "killing a cop." Apparently, the 16-year-old wanted to kill a cop in an attempt to prove himself to a Pomona street gang.

Officer Steiner had been a member of the California Highway Patrol since 1999. His colleagues described him as a positive influence on the police force, the kind of guy who never had anything bad to say about anyone.

On top of being a well-respected cop, he was an excellent marksman and an avid sports fan. Officer Steiner is survived by his wife, his 13-year-old stepson, and his three-year old son.

These three killings occurred in an 11-day period in April. They are but the latest deaths to report.

Two months ago, Los Angeles Police Officer Ricardo Lizzaraga was killed while responding to a domestic violence call.

At the apartment where the call originated, Officer Lizarraga confronted a man. Within seconds, the individual drew a gun and shot Lizarraga twice in the back as he and his fellow officers fled from the apartment. The suspect in the shooting was a known gang member.

Officer Lizarraga, 31, had served two-and-a half years on the force. In that time, he quickly became a well-respected police officer known for his strong work ethic and great attention to detail.

He was viewed as a gentle giant by his colleagues, friends and family. Los Angeles Police Chief William Bratton described him as the “face of Los Angeles.”

Officer Lizarraga is survived by his wife, Joyce.

These stories are chilling. They remind us that even those charged with protecting us are vulnerable. They reveal a segment of society that is utterly lawless, unbound by any code of decency.

And sadly, they are just a few of the stories that we will tell this year of cops being killed in the line of duty.

These tragic deaths are sure to continue because we have not done enough to stem the availability of guns nor curb the viciousness of gangs.

This Body knows well that the assault weapons ban is on the verge of expiration. However, what this Congress has failed to recognize is that if we allow assault weapons to be more freely available, law enforcement officers will be in even greater danger.

Around 70 officers are killed each year by criminals. And, according to a study by the Violence Policy Center, 1 in 5 law enforcement officers killed between 1998 and 2001 were shot with assault weapons. Now, police officers in San Francisco and other cities are exploring whether to equip officers with military-style assault rifles and Kevlar-plated vests.

And that’s why nearly every law enforcement organization in the country supports renewing the ban on assault weapons – they know that the lives of their officers are at risk.

The expiration of the ban would mean that assault weapons like the one used to kill Officer Isaac Espinoza will be easier to obtain whether at the nearest gun shop, sporting goods store or in someone’s home.

The easier it is for criminals to get their hands on these weapons, the easier it will be for them to terrorize communities.

To honor the many law enforcement officers who have given their lives in service to their communities, we must renew the assault weapons ban before it expires on September 13.

But there is much more that we need to do to make communities and cops safer in America. In particular, we must check the rampant gang violence that plagues our city streets and, increasingly, our suburbs and rural communities.

Gang violence used to be a local problem, demanding local solutions. But over the last 12 years, since I have been in the Senate, I have seen this problem spread from isolated neighborhoods to communities across this country.

Gangs have become more sophisticated and more violent criminal enterprises. What were once loosely-organized groups centered around dealing drugs within a particular neighborhood are now complex criminal organizations whose activities include weapons trafficking, gambling, smuggling, robbery, and, of course, homicide.

In 2002, over half of the 1,228 homicides committed in Los Angeles County were gang-related. Similarly, over half of the 499 murders committed in the city of Los Angeles during 2003 were the result of gang violence.

The reach of gangs, however, extends far beyond Southern California.

In fact, Los Angeles serves as a “source city” whose gang members migrate to other communities across the country and set up new criminal entities. One such operation, the L.A.-based 18th Street Gang, is known to have initiated gang activities all over California, in Southwest border and Pacific Northwest states, and in East Coast states including New Jersey and New York.

Today’s gangs are more sophisticated, more violent, and more numerous than they were 12 years ago. And that is why we need a strong federal response.

I’ve introduced legislation with Senator Hatch that will give law enforcement and local communities the tools to deal with gang violence.

Our legislation:

- Creates new federal crimes to enable prosecutors to target violent gang members;
- Makes changes to current law to allow for effective prosecution for violent street gang crimes;
- Authorizes \$650 million for law enforcement and community groups for suppression, prevention, and intervention programs.

This bill gives us an opportunity to do something about the gang violence that beleaguers our communities and endangers our cops. We owe it to these fine officers who were killed so viciously to do what we can to prevent more violence by gangs.

If we fail to act on both these measures, I am sad to say that I will be back here before long telling the story of some other fine law enforcement officer who is patrolling the streets of one of our communities right now. We must do everything possible to prevent these killings from happening over and over again."